



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# IMPRESSIONS OF OPERA IN FRANCE

By GEORGE CECIL

ALL things considered, opera is given in France under favourable conditions. True, it flourishes elsewhere in Europe, often yielding the *entrepreneur* a handsome profit on his outlay, and vastly pleasing the audience. Yet, odious though comparisons may be, according to the copy-book, the cold fact remains that the average performance in Italy, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and in those countries which border on the nearer East, is less satisfying than the average performance in France. It may please the easily satisfied person, to whom an evening's outing merely is a means towards an end, a method of passing the hours between dinner and bed time. But the true connoisseur, who understands music and its interpretation, would award the palm to France.

## PILLARS OF OPERA.

Ever since I can remember, it has been the custom amongst old *habitués* of opera houses the world over to compare the present performers with their predecessors, and to the detriment of the former. A hundred and fifty years ago, an English patron of opera published a little book in which he complained that the singers of his time could not vie with those introduced by Handel. Paris is no exception. According to captious critics, the brightest stars of to-day are but the pale shadows of the stars which scintillated ten, twenty, thirty—any number of years ago. And they generally are right. The voices frequently are of excellent quality, but the manner in which they are used, occasionally leaves something to be desired. Whether these artists have been in too great a hurry to make their *début*, and, consequently, have not devoted sufficient time to the placing of the voice, or whether they have fallen into the hands of advertising quacks, this deponent knoweth not. It is, however, beyond dispute that the material is not always employed to the best advantage.

Fortunately, the French lyric stage is graced by Renaud the incomparable, and Lafont, that most admirable *basse chantante*, whose *mezza voce* in "Et toi, Freia" helps to redeem "Sigurd"

from its atmosphere of abysmal dullness. Miranda, too, contributes to the prestige of French opera, for is not her charming and flexible voice invariably heard to advantage in works of the "Rigoletto" and "Lakmé" type? Demougeot is another really fine artist, her Tosca being a thing to remember with genuine pleasure, and Vanni Marcoux is one of the several clever singers to whom the *cognoscenti* are indebted. Franz, who heads the tenors at the Paris Opera, like Chérubin, goes "from success to success," the penetrating volume of his chest notes (which he emits with such enviable ease) invariably enrapturing his hearers; and Rouard, the baritone, another pillar of this establishment, is the happy possessor of one of those "round", even voices which recall Graziani, who flourished about the year 'one.

The beautiful Vallandri also upholds the best traditions of opera in France. Her voice, which is of such good quality, is used in a manner which satisfies the severe critic, and her singing has a charm all its own. Indeed, the Opéra Comique revival of "Les Noces de Figaro" owes much of its continuous success to her fascinating Suzanne, and to her interpretation of the delicious air in the last act—which rings in one's ears long after the performance is over. Journet's exceptionally fine organ is another valuable asset, its sonority awakening the echoes of the Opera.

From time to time Battistini, in whom survives the almost lost art of *il bel canto*, is heard in Paris. The beauty of his ever fresh voice, the penetrating quality of his famous upper notes, the smoothness of his singing, and the perfection of his *coloratura*, come as a revelation to the very appreciative audience. He is the only Italian singer who is engaged "*en représentation*" at the Opera.

#### OLD-TIME OPERAS.

Although the changes often have been rung on the Opera and the Opéra Comique, the fame of the Trianon Lyrique and the Gaiété Lyrique apparently have not travelled far beyond Paris. Yet both are admirably managed institutions, with an invariably interesting *répertoire*, while the singing frequently is satisfactory and the acting most admirable. The prices of admission, too, are more or less moderate, for an orchestra stall, or a seat in the first balcony, costs comparatively little, and if you prefer the discomfort of an absurdly small chair in a cramped box, you pay but a few francs for the privilege of being uncomfortable. The stalls, by the way, rejoice in a "rake"; and selfishly-inclined

ladies are not allowed to obstruct the view of the stage with monstrous head-gear—thank Heaven! Therefore, as the singing is usually more than adequate, and the programme often a particularly well-chosen one, it must be admitted that the entertainment yields value for money.

The *répertoire* at the Trianon Lyrique is a boon to those who hanker after the little-known and forgotten. Here are performed Grétry's old-time "Richard, Coeur de Lion," with the famous air "Richard, O mon Roi", the same composer's amusing "Les Deux Avides", "Monsigny's "Le Déserteur", in which there is a wealth of fine music, and Paër's "Le Maître de Chapelle". The last-named often is given, and if the Trianon Lyrique baritones do not quite obliterate memories of Pini-Corsi, *buffo* and singer of the first order, who sings the *rôle* in Italy, their intentions at least are excellent, while they sometimes are fulfilled. As is the custom in *opéra comique*, a vast amount of talking goes on, since spoken lines take the place of sung recitative. This is to be regretted, as, in addition to boring the listener who wishes to hear singing, and not chattering, conversation is extremely bad for the voice. Besides, it reduces an opera to the level of that most accursed entertainment, musical comedy.

Other works which are performed include "Le Barbier de Seville", which, despite the French origin of its "book", is infinitely preferable in Italian, "La Traviata", "Madame Butterfly", "La Vie de Bohème", "Le Postillon de Longjumeau" (so seldom heard outside France), "Véronique", "Les Noces de Jeanette", "Paul et Virginie", "Le Trouvère", and "Le Châlet" (chiefly remembered by "Vallons d'Hélvétie"). Novelties apparently are not encouraged, and that perhaps is as well, for the music of latter-day French composers of opera is more remarkable for musicianship than for musical feeling.

The Gaiété Lyrique is the home of *opéra bouffe*, *opéra léger* and *opérette*. Several of the pieces performed there, such as "La Cocarde de Mimi Pinson", "Les Vingt Huit Jours de Clairette" and "L'Auberge Tuhoi-Buhoi" contain some pretty and melodious music, which generally is well sung, while the acting invariably is good. Offenbach and Lecocq also "fill the bill", drawing all Paris—as in the days of the famous Hortense Schneider, who sang in so many of these joyous confections. Occasionally *réclame* is sought by engaging some well known artist from the Opéra Comique. Last year, for example, Françel and Carré appeared in "La Belle Hélène" of Offenbach, and, lured by the unusual combination, Parisians flocked to the theatre night

after night. Jean Pèrier also was transferred—temporarily—from the Opéra Comique to the light opera stage, having sung in “Véronique”. This versatile artist’s critics are divided into two camps; those who, while deploring his limited vocal means, go into raptures over his acting, and those who declare that opera demands a voice and that the performer who has a poor one should not seek fame on the lyric stage. Yet the intrepid Pèrier has appeared in many parts, including Don Juan, Lothario and Mârouf, thus essaying a baritone, *basse-chantante* and tenor rôle. “*Il dit si bien et il est si bon comédien*”, gushes an admirer to whom perfect diction, distinct enunciation and clever acting mean everything. “*A quoi bon puis qu’il n’a pas de voix*”, snaps the critic. Luckily for French performers whose voice is not their most prized possession, singers of the Pèrier type enjoy a success which they would scarcely meet with elsewhere. In Italy, for instance, voice, and plenty of it, is insisted upon; and in England the reputed critics are so hopelessly ignorant, and the taste of the public is so appallingly bad, that mediocrity, even unmusical bellowing, is appreciated to an alarming extent.

Meanwhile, in Paris, art conceals art, and with a vengeance! Tenors (especially tenors) come and go; but the old brigade, like the brook, goes on for ever. Their reputation in some cases has been founded on diction, and, long after the voice has lost its pristine freshness, the performer continues to enjoy the favour of the management, and of the public. . . . “My dear, to-morrow is our silver wedding, say, let’s go and hear ——— in ———. We last heard him in it the day we were married; and they say his diction is better than ever.” Thus Darby and Joan. . . .

### PROVINCIAL OPERA.

In the provinces a different order of things prevails. The graces of singing certainly meet with due appreciation, for, go where you will, French amateurs are excellent judges of the details which make up the perfect singer. A neatly executed run, a smoothly rendered turn, an effective *crescendo*, mastery over the difficult *decrescendo*, and so forth, are immensely appreciated by them. At the same time, they generally demand a more or less good voice, though a good voice badly used leaves them absolutely cold, and very properly, too. The French provincial public is by the way of being a critical one; and if attempts are made to foist on it second rate singers, the local opera house quickly loses its patrons. Perhaps that is why one gets such satisfactory

performers at the Rouen Théâtre des Arts, the famous theatre where "Samson et Dalila" had its *première* in France. Alice Raveau, whose Charlotte intensifies the fascinations of "Werther", has appeared there, as also have Chénal (the handsome and statuesque Chénal), Demougeot, Darmel, and many other artists of note. The Lille *dilettanti* also pride themselves on their critical faculty. Catholic as to taste, the Lillois listen as readily to "Les Cloches de Corneville" as they do to "La Tosca", but they refuse to put up with bad singing. However great the baritone's reputation, let him take liberties with the time, and he will not be invited to pay a return visit. The Carmen of the occasion may look the part to perfection, but, if, like Patti and Nordica, she has failed to give expression to the music, Lille will have none of her. Lille, in short, is proud of its reputation, and loses no opportunity of letting the unwary visitor know it. A really patriotic Lillois will tell you that his native town is even more exacting than Barcelona, where Caruso, it is said, could not live up to the *réclame* which was made for him in advance of his arrival. However, Caruso is not likely to sing in Lille: he probably is too expensive a luxury. . . . .

Criticism is less acute in Calais and Boulogne. And that is only right, for, the chorus being recruited from the local fishing element, one feels that neither the Calaisiens nor the Boulonnais would be justified in demanding too much of the principals. Stalwart and well built, these nautical choristers certainly cut a fine figure, and if they are not born singers—well, like the accompanist at the mining camp concert, they do their best. Havre also possesses its Opera Housse, the leading Parisian artists appearing thereat, while the large towns of the Midi and elsewhere are strongholds of opera, Nantes, Bordeaux, Lyons, Toulouse and Marseilles being amongst them. The public, while not hypercritical, demands adequate artists, and woe betide the *impresario*, who, trusting to luck, or to the indulgence of the audience, endeavours to palm off on his patrons a spurious article. Badgered by the subscribers, and attacked by the local papers, he will rue the day that he tried to make money at the expense of his clients (in France anybody who pays for anything is a "client"). He may even lose the subvention without which ends cannot be expected to meet.

#### RIVIERA OPERA.

Opera on the Riviera is a thing apart. At Monte Carlo, where the spring season is run to render the place additionally

attractive, rather than as a money-making proposition, no expense is spared upon this laudable endeavour. The services of the most renowned singers from all parts of the world are secured, and Raoul Gunsbourg, for so many years director of operatic affairs, makes a special feature of the scenery and costumes. A certain number of new works are produced, some of which find their way to other theatres, "Chérubin", "Thérèse", "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame", "Don Quichotte" and many another Massenet opera having been amongst them. Some, less fortunate, are seldom heard of again; while others, at the end of the season, are consigned to the dust of oblivion. This, however, is not to be wondered at; one can only marvel that they should ever have been produced. Nice, Monte Carlo's next door neighbour, rejoices in two theatres where opera is given, one of which forms part and parcel of the Casino. Here, as also at Monte Carlo, during the waits the audience looks in at the tables, the intervals being arranged so that the punters have plenty of time in which to lose more than they can afford. Cannes also caters for opera-lovers, and very well, too. Last year, for instance, with a view to contrast, "Don Giovanni" was given in Italian with Battistini, and shortly afterwards in French with Renaud. As both artists are famous in the rôle, and as each has his own ideas as to how the part should be sung, played and dressed, upon these two important occasions the house was crowded with experienced judges anxious to compare the two renderings. Indeed, the inspiration was a flash of genius; the Legion of Honour has been bestowed for less. . .

From time to time, French operas undergo their first baptism of criticism at Nice. A few come through the ordeal with flying colours; others ever afterwards languish in obscurity, and it is to be feared that they deserve their fate. Though well performed and adequately mounted, they lack that very essential thing, sustained interest. Really, some composers positively have flown in the face of Providence. Their work shows musicianship galore; constructional skill is lavished on each page of the score; and there is no lack of originality. But these abortive attempts to win fame and fortune are doomed to failure at the very outset, for they are nothing, more or less, than a tone-poem set to words, or words set to a tone-poem, whichever way you like to look at it. Melody apparently is the last consideration of these well-meaning geniuses. In France, as in other countries, it is considered by those who pay for the privilege of listening, that music without melody defeats its purpose. This possibly is the reason that

Massenet is so popular throughout France. The "high brows" jeer at him as a feminist composer of sugary ditties intended for the delectation of sentimental men and women incapable of appreciating really well thought-out music; music with a purpose, they will tell you, was beyond Massenet, and that he scarcely is less trivial than Bellini. In justice to the dead composer, it may be pointed out that if his "purpose" was to provide managers with operas which drew large audiences, he, at least, did not descend to writing rubbish, and that in nearly all his scores, original and distinctive melody, page upon page of it, is to be found. He certainly never claimed to be a master of orchestration; but his accompaniments invariably fit in with the words and with the situation, while the simple harmonies which he employs always are appropriate. In a word, respect for Massenet is not lessened by the popularity of his successful works.

It may be noted that singers of eminence have associated themselves with several of the operas which of late years have been produced at Riviera theatres. Calvé, for example, headed the cast at the *première* of Reynaldo Hahn's "La Carmélite; Chaliapine (Russians declare that he still is in the land of the living) appeared in "Don Quichotte" and Mary Garden in "Chérubin;" and Renaud created the part of Boniface in "Le Jongleur"—as "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame" is affectionately known in operatic circles. Saint-Saëns' "Hélène" also had its first performance under happy auspices, Melba singing the title-*rôle*.

#### UNSUCCESSFUL ENTERPRISE.

Opera is so well established in Paris, and there is so much of it, that fresh enterprise seldom meets with success, even when success is merited. Recently, for example, the Vaudeville Theatre was renamed the Théâtre Lyrique, newly decorated, swept and garnished, and opened as an opera house, in opposition, perhaps to the Opéra Comique. A start was made with Massenet's "Cléopâtre," a work in which, alas, the composer does not show to his customary advantage. An almost interminable string of Cléopâtres, including Mary Garden and Kousnietzof, were amongst the attractions, and Renaud, as Marc Antoine, invested the music with all the distinction of which he is so complete a master. "Il Barbieri" with an Italian cast, and "Tarass Boulba," a new, and, it must be confessed, disappointing work, were included in the *répertoire*. So, too, was the unequal "Méfistoféle,"



with Vanni Marcoux's sardonic reading of the name-part. The novelty, however, did not fulfill the hopes of its promoters. Good houses owed their appearance largely to *billets de faveur*, and the expenses were heavy. "Will anyone make money out of it?" asked the gossips. "Yes" was the reply, "the artists will! For the management has money to burn." Presumably they burned it, since, after a few weeks, the undertaking proved to be but an ephemeral affair, and the Théâtre Lyrique once more became, as of old, the Vaudeville. Comedy is now played there. *Sic transit*. The Théâtre des Champs Elysées, which consists of a large and a small theatre, also has again been turned to operatic account, with a revival of "Quo Vadis," in which Battistini made a few welcome appearances. The season, however, did not endure very long. Perhaps the poster, which gave the impression that "Quo Vadis" is a circus, rather than an opera, failed to impress the public. A season of Italian opera also was tried, the diverting and melodious "Don Pasquale" of Donizetti being the opening attraction. Owing to the difficulties in obtaining a license to keep the theatre open later than eleven o'clock, and to the appalling unpunctuality which obtains in French musical circles, the final act, with the alluring *duettino*, "Tornami a dir," had to be cut. With this inauspicious opening the venture came to an end. Its untimely demise is to be regretted, for in a music-loving and cosmopolitan town like Paris, Italian operas performed in the vernacular, and by competent Italian singers, might prove a "draw." Such works, especially those of a semi-*buffo* type, when sung in French leave something to be desired, while the Italian language is in itself a delight and an education to those who possess a musical ear. Southern artists certainly do not always rely for their effects upon the graces of singing, as do the French; their habit of showing off the voice by holding on to a note with all the breath in their bodies does not commend itself to an audience whose taste has been cultivated in a more refined school. But, as practice is said to make perfect, just as a succession of errors may lead to ultimate success, there is no reason why intelligent Italian singers should not learn to sing according to the dictates of Paris taste.

It may be added that Italian opera always was, still is, and probably always will be popular in Paris. With *la lingua Toscana* as an added inducement, a well managed season should add to the gaiety of the town, and, incidentally, put money into the pocket of its *impresario*. Stranger things have happened in the operatic world. . .

## VARIOUS MATTERS

Certain operas seldom are heard outside Paris, while others, except for an occasional revival, are relegated to the provincial programme. "Goyescas," "La Légende de St. Christophe," "La Rotisserie de La Rue Pédauque (the plot of which is taken from Anatole France's book of the same name) and several others, do not travel, but "Guillaume Tell" and "Les Huguenots" apparently have been made over to the provinces. Nor is it surprising that the two last-named seldom are heard in Paris, for it surely must be admitted that they have many dull moments. It is difficult, too, to find a competent tenor for the *rôle* of Arnold, Rossini having written mercilessly for Mathilde's not particularly interesting lover. As to "Les Huguenots," almost every dramatic soprano, *colorature*-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, *basse-chantante* and bass throughout the realm of opera knows this abnormally long work. Consequently, it can be put on at short notice. "Huguenots to-morrow night," wires the provincial manager to his Paris agent, "can you send me a Raoul, a St. Bris and a Valentine." "Can send you three of each" is the reassuring answer. The name-part in "Guillaume Tell" also is more or less easily filled, for there are several baritones possessing the quality of voice, and the dramatic capabilities which the arduous *rôle* demands, amongst them being Boulogne, a singer of exceptional merit. Indeed, the last-named is so fine an artist that his presence in the cast infuses new life into the somewhat antiquated opera.

Several once popular works, such as Cherubini's "Les deux Journées (Cherubini, according to George Moore, is the last of classical composers), "Le Bal Masqué," "La Favorite," "La Flûte Enchantée," "Lucie de Lammermoor," "La Juive," Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine" and "Le Prophète," and many another, have more or less disappeared from the *répertoire*. So also has Méhul's "Joseph et ses Frères," which is so delightfully reminiscent of Mozart. Indeed, it is years since it has been heard in Paris, though, sometime ago, it was given in the Château chapel at Versailles in aid of charity. Recently, "Cosi fan tutte" was revived at the Opéra Comique, where this interesting example of Mozart's genius had been in rehearsal for some months past. *A propos*, the Opéra Comique company being a stock one, there is time for leisurely rehearsing, and the brothers Isola (who so successfully manage the concern) see to it that no work is presented to the public till it has been adequately prepared

down to the minutest detail. Indeed, quite a respectable number of novelties and revivals figure in the list during the year; for the company being a large one, its resources, so far as *répétitions* go, are almost limitless. Whether some of the productions which are rehearsed so assiduously are, from the artistic standpoint, worth the trouble bestowed upon them, is another matter. . . . Still, whatever the value of the music, the theatre invariably is crammed to its very walls, be the opera "Manon," or "Mignon," or "Carmen," all of which have been performed there several times a month for very many years past, or "La Rotisserie de la Rue Pédauque," which had its *première* a few months ago. The success of this theatre is, in fact, extraordinary. The Opera, according to the papers, does little more than pay its way, and can only afford to open its doors a limited number of nights a week. The Opéra Comique, on the other hand, in addition to giving seven evening performances a week all the year round, announces innumerable *matinées*. It is indeed a paying proposition . . .

In happy pre-war days, Paris welcomed Richard Strauss' "Rosencavalier," and Wagner was appreciated throughout France. Parisians, forgetting that they had greeted the production of "Tannhäuser" with toy balloons, which, upon bursting, emitted a most pestiferous odour, and that at the conclusion of the hunting scene, with which the first act closes, the dogs alone were applauded, have learned to look upon the opera as a master-piece. The most noted artists have pined to appear in the once hated work, as the pious Wolfram, as the dignified Landgraf, and as the forgiving Elizabeth; and each member of the orchestra has taken a personal interest in the music. "Les Maîtres Chanteurs" and "Lohengrin" were acclaimed in every important opera-house in France; and even the somewhat tedious "Ring" was listened to in respectful silence, though eventually the irrepressible wits of journalism laughed at its *longueurs*. But the moment war was declared, scores and orchestra parts were put away; and, until recently, no manager has dared to propose reviving the works of a German who died many years before hostilities were contemplated, and who was, into the bargain, "agin' the government." All one heard of Wagner was an occasional excerpt at a concert, and it was only after considerable opposition that the public has been brought to tolerate a less trifling return to pre-war conditions.

#### OPEN AIR OPERA.

Although the French have a horror of draughts, a horror which has been handed down from generation to generation, they

show their practical appreciation of the fresh air by supporting *al fresco* performances of opera. These are given during the summer, the best known being those which take place in the gardens of the Tuileries, where abridged versions of popular works, such as "Mireille," "Lakmé" (in which Mignon Nevada lately made a very successful "guest" appearance at the Opéra Comique), "Rigoletto," "Le Trouvère," and the eternal "Noces de Jeannette," are performed. There positively is no getting away from the rather tiresome "Noces de Jeannette," with its bucolic humor and insipid music. If "Cavalleria Rusticana" (which does not go well in any language but Italian) cannot be performed, Victor Massé's artless strains fill the theatre, the enraptured audience drinking in "Cours, mon aiguille" as though they had never heard it before, and applauding the loutish husband's drunken frolics as being the acme of high comedy. "Mignon," too, is given, as also "Manon" and "La Fille du Régiment," the famous "Rat-à-plan" duet (in which the warlike sergeant reminds the metamorphosed Marie of her younger days when she was borne on the strength of the regiment) invariably gaining the honours of a *bis*. Upon these occasions the performance is worth far more than the few francs which one's seat costs, for, thanks to the good use which the artists make of the "*fosse nasale*", their voices carry admirably, while the acting often is all that could be desired. "Faust" also is heard under these conditions, and the choice invariably meets with approval. At the Opéra, however, the audience views Gounod's music in quite a different light. Upon "Faust" nights subscribers lend their boxes to their friends and poor relations, and the pen and ink artists of the comic papers make sorry jests at the expense of the immortal work, those who are present in the boxes being depicted playing bridge, or discussing politics and *chiffons*—according to their sex. So nothing, you see, is sacred to the scoffer, not even the gorgeous final trio. . . .

Open-air representations of "Carmen" occasionally have taken place, and with *éclat*, particularly if the arena at Vichy has been used for the purpose. Principals of repute have figured in the cast; Escamillo has addressed his song to the genuine article, a real bullfighting personnel having been imported from Spain; and the town itself and the neighbouring villages have furnished a stage crowd of huge proportions. Up till now no manager has succeeded in finding a *toreador* who combines with the slaughtering of bulls the gentler art of singing about it. Yet there is hope, for the song in question demands a strong pair of lungs rather than an accomplished singer. Bizet, in fact, wrote it for that purpose.

When "Carmen" was produced (with Galli-Marié in the name part) it failed, the ill-informed critics declaring that the music was devoid of local colour. "And this," tearfully wailed the poor composer, "after I have spent weeks in Spain permeating my mind with local colour!" So, in a pet, he composed the "Couplets du Toréador," dedicating the noisy ditty to "*la canaille*." "It is all," quoth he, "that they are fit to understand." The absurdity of a bull-fighter describing a bull-fight to his brother bull-fighters and to a stage audience which patronises a bull-fight regularly every Sunday afternoon doubtless suggested itself to him. To-day "Carmen" is as much liked as any work on the list. It probably is played many times a week throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Fired by the example of the Cairo Khedivial theatre authorities, who celebrated a certain anniversay of the opening of the theatre by having "Aïda" performed in the open air with the Pyramides for a back-ground, one or two enterprising theatrical magnates have gone into the question of giving the opera in France under much the same conditions, with card-bound Pyramids and imported sand to represent the desert. The late Oscar Hammerstein is said to have thought the idea feasible, and to have called for Pyramid designs. His unfortunate London Opera House speculations, however, interfered with a somewhat riotous fancy. . . .

#### WAR ACTIVITIES.

Upon the declaration of war, operatic activities ceased immediately. Male singers below a certain age were at once mobilized, and many a patriotic Elsa, Santuzza, Micaëla, Lakmé and Rosine took lessons in "first aid," and tended the wounded, just as Marie Röze did during the Franco-Prussian war. By degrees, the older men were "called to the colours," while numerous artists who were prevented by imperfect health, and for various other reasons, from doing as their younger *camarades* had done, took up "war work" at bases. Thus, a percentage of opera singers, though deprived of their income, at least were able to earn a living. Many, however, were not so lucky. The Government sternly forbade any sort of *spectacle*; and until permission was obtained to re-open the theatres for an occasional performance, their state was pitiable. For, in many cases, the small savings which they had laboriously acquired soon were exhausted. In Paris parties of them might be heard singing concerted pieces from the different operas in the courtyards of the

big apartment houses, the inhabitants of which willingly contributed their mite, often a substantial one. Numbers of those before whom they sang made a point of inviting them to lunch, or dinner, on certain days, doing so with that charming tact and grace which are so essentially French. Later on, the position improved; and by the beginning of 1917 representations had again become general, artists even being released from semi-active service for the purpose of taking up their old career. The tenor doffed the steel helmet and *bleu horizon* of his *cuirassier* regiment for Don José's lancer cap and gaudy yellow tunic, and the baritone returned his rifle and bayonet to stores, and grasped the property sword with which Valentine keeps Mefistophélès at bay. Franz, freed from his duties as *maréchal des logis* (the non-commissioned officer who makes the billeting arrangements) once again was heard at the Paris Opera in "Le Cid." Renaud, wounded, his broad breast blazing with decorations, and covered with glory, also reappeared. One of his first performances was at Rouen, where he sang Athanäel in "Thaïs," a rôle in which, it may be remembered, he achieved much success at the Manhattan Opera House, New York.

Upon the re-opening of those theatres which were closed during the earlier stages of hostilities, artists who hitherto had been kept in the background at last were afforded the opportunities for which they had so long waited, and they certainly made the most of their chances, both in Paris and in the provinces. In fact, during this period the singing was generally more satisfactory than it had been prior to the war, for it must be confessed that some of the older generation of performers were simply trading on their reputation. Really competent singers found themselves promoted to positions to which they might otherwise have aspired in vain. A small touring troupe, for instance, which visited the Northern towns shortly before the Armistice, and which was mainly composed of little-known artists, sometimes gave really admirable performances.

There was a distinct element of uncertainty and excitement about these bravely organised affairs. The train accomodation being mostly required for the transport of troops, the singers could not always depend upon reaching their destination in time for the performance; many owed their arrival at the theatre to the friendly offer of a lift in a passing army motor-lorry. Make-shift scenery and hastily extemporised costumes had to be used; mediæval Faust wooed Marguerite in the same modern village square in which the callous Turiddu spurned the outraged Santuzza,

and the Indian bazar in which Lakmé sang "Où va le jeune Hindou?" did duty for the first act of "Werther." Orchestra rehearsals were made impossible by lack of funds, according to the managers, and, according to the instrumentalists, by managerial greed. Consequently, all sorts of unrehearsed effects occurred, such as the curtain rising before the scene was completely set and falling upon the hero at the psychological moment when he was about to bring down the house with a chest note *in alt*. At a Calais *matinée* of "Rigoletto," for instance, it rose no fewer than three times upon the first act; once before the overture was finished, and the third time, despite the frantic exhortations of the frenzied conductor, it did not move an inch till several pages of the act had been played.

Upon another occasion an air attack interfered with the proceedings at the Calais Opera House. The night was so inky-black that the military authorities considered a raid unlikely, the enemy being averse to darkness because of the risk which they ran of being "picked up" by searchlights. Eight o'clock arrived, and the curtain rose on the first act of "Mignon." At first all went merrily as the proverbial marriage-bell. The fishermen-choristers showed to advantage in the opening drinking chorus, which, dealing, as it does, with their favorite tippie, was sung *con gusto*. Lothario's pathetic air moved the packed house to emotion; and the much-persecuted heroine's sorry plight speedily enlisted the sympathies of every man, woman and child in the audience. Then came the catastrophe. The "*Duo des Hirondelles*" was in progress; Lothario had declared that Mignon's voice rejuvenated his ancient guitar, and Mignon had addressed herself to the "*oiseaux bénis de Dieu*," when the syrens in the harbour gave the usual warning. "*Tenez, je n'aime pas ces oiseaux-là*" observed a local jester. "*Ils ne sont pas bénis de Dieu; pas du tout. Je me saure!*" The conductor hurriedly laid down his *bâton*; the members of the orchestra swiftly beat a retreat; and Mignon and Lothario, racing for the wings, sought shelter in a cellar, where they were joined by the stage hands, the other principals already having left the building. The audience, being thoroughly accustomed to air attacks, took matters coolly; to the accompaniment of incessant firing they sought the various subterranean shelters in the neighbourhood of the theatre, and there awaited the welcome "all clear" signal. Nor had the syrens given the warning any too soon, for scarcely had the house emptied itself than the first bomb, a two hundred pound one, fell—and only a few hundred yards from the theatre. Bang went another, and another, bringing

down tons of bricks and mortar, the "barrage" put up by the French and British batteries failing to deter the adventurous Boche spirit.

An hour passed without any firing, and people began to ask why they should continue to remain in a state of discomfort, when a listening post, many *kilomètres* away, 'phoned the approach of the enemy. The sky speedily became ablaze with search-lights, and the batteries again opened fire, and with deafening roar, too, when several guns were fired simultaneously. Finally, at midnight, the anxiously awaited signal was given, and the audience went to bed, glad to have escaped with their skins, though their pockets, owing to the interrupted performance, had suffered.

#### THE INDISPENSABLE FOYER.

The French, taking a pride in their public buildings, see to it that the theatre is worthy of its surroundings. (The Lille Opera House, for example, is a particularly imposing one. Commenced before the war, the Germans, upon occupying the town, completed it; and the English, having ousted the unwelcome visitors, sacrilegiously produced the musical comedies of their native land.) With scarcely any exceptions worth mentioning, the acoustics throughout France generally are all that can be desired, while the decorations often are tasteful, the *foyer*, in particular, coming in for a large share of the architect's and decorator's attention. The *foyer*, in short, is looked upon as a meeting-place, a club, where friends and acquaintances foregather to pass the time of day, to discuss the singers, and—most important thing—to be seen. Indeed, to many people the *entr'acte* is as precious as the performance, and the management, recognising this, caters for popular taste by allowing as much as half an hour for a wait. As the proceedings often are late in beginning, the opera may finish at an hour which seriously curtails the sleep of those who have to be up early the next day. Fortunately, the scarcity of coal occasionally acts as a bar to lengthy intervals, for the municipal authorities, sternly setting their faces against the wasteful expenditure of electric light, do not allow the performance to continue after eleven o'clock. An excellent rule!

France being pre-eminently a land of trades unions, managers sometimes are confronted with strikes. The singers do not strike; but the musicians and the stage hands spare no expense in this direction. Upon the occasion of a *grève*, there is nothing for the harassed *impresario* to do but to close the theatre and to



await developments, unless he finds it to his interest to accede to the demands of the strikers. The artists, without expressing an opinion one way or the other, willingly take part in performances arranged by malcontents, the proceeds being devoted to the funds required for carrying on operations. They thus display tact, for, until the dispute is settled, their means of earning a living are at an end, unless they have the good fortune to be paid by the month instead of "*par représentation.*" Last year the Paris Opera suffered severely from a series of strikes.

Evening dress, by the way, is not insisted upon in the more expensive parts of the theatre. The women certainly make the most of the opportunity to deck themselves out in the height of the mode (when does a woman neglect a chance of wasting money on fallals?) The men, however, content themselves with a morning coat, many wearing the same suit in which they set about their business first thing in the morning. Dinner jackets are not uncommon; but the time-honoured "swallow-tail" is rarely seen, even in Paris. Many uniforms are dotted about, and very attractive they are, too, with their varied colour-scheme and rank distinctions in gold or silver lace, or both. Khaki also is on view, for British officers from the Rhine Army of occupation have the good taste to spend their leave in Paris and in other towns where opera is given.

### THE CRITICS.

The standard of criticism is above the average, both in Paris and in the provinces. But newspaper space is valuable, the daily papers being comparatively small; consequently, detailed criticism of the singing sometimes has to be omitted. Though unavoidable, this is none the less tiresome, for when a distinguished artist undertakes a *rôle* in which other famous singers have appeared, and which bristles with difficulties, one naturally wishes to know what a competent critic has to say about the artist's singing and about his, or her, conception of the part. To be baldly informed that "So-and-So, as Scarpia, was wholly effective" conveys nothing. A Scarpia who sings through the strenuous second act sitting on the sofa might be effective; but the intelligent amateur wishes to be told if the music is in the newcomer's voice, and if his reading of the character differs from that of other baritones. Novelties certainly meet with more attention, but even then so much is said about the score and the plot that a criticism of the actual performance has to be crowded into a few lines.

Some of the critics, by the way, have a pretty wit, amongst them being Georges Boyer of "*Le Petit Journal*." Upon one occasion Boyer was asked by a soprano to differentiate between the several feminine voices. "There is," quoth the oracle, "the voice of the soprano, the voice of the contralto, and the voice of la Patti!" When "*Cléopâtre*" was produced at the Théâtre Lyrique, the frankly Anglo-Saxon accent of an English member of the cast drew from him the remark: "I did not know till now that even in the days of Cleopatra the English had got as far as Egypt." Boyer also had a ready answer when he found himself in opposition to the Lyrique *direction*. "So I am not welcome? Never mind, the next management will perhaps be glad to see me—in two or three days". The following week the operatic venture was at an end. . . . .

It is the aim of every French singer to be engaged by the year, at the Paris Opera, and to receive a monthly salary. With regular work and regular pay, their future is more or less assured, for the appointment (which may last a life-time) carries with it a certain *cachet*, and the duties do not interfere with the pleasures of existence. The evening performance, however, sometimes prevents an artist dining out. "Will you come to dinner to-night?" demanded a hospitable host of a popular baritone, who has been engaged at the Opera for countless years. "A thousand regrets," replied Amonasro, who was taking part in the performance of "*Aïda*" that evening, "I have to go to my *bureau*."